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ABSTRACT

This learning module was designed to familiarize community college instructors with the characteristics of nontraditional students and with strategies for providing these students with a positive learning environment. After introductory material offering a rationale for the module, Part I provides a list of key concepts, a statement of learning objectives, and a pretest. It then discusses the characteristics of nontraditional students, including their external locus of control, and examines the differences in the motivation and expectations of these students and their instructors. Profiles are then presented of four typical nontraditional students: a displaced homemaker; a chronically unemployed, black veteran; a 48-year-old, blue-collar worker trying to begin a new career; and an immature 17-year-old with poor motivation and an unrealistic view of her academic skills. Exercises are then provided which offer descriptions of the classroom behaviors typical of these four prototypes and require instructors to name similar students from their experience and list the actions they have taken in response to the students' needs. A post-test concludes Part I. Part II presents 15 strategies for improving interpersonal relations and communication with nontraditional students and 16 suggestions for modifying the classroom environment to better meet their needs. Learning activities are provided to help instructors apply the module's content in the classroom. (JP)

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BUILDING SUCCESS
IN
THE CLASSROOM

by

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JC 810 174

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges are in the midst of a period of tremendous change. Projections indicate that in the 1980s enrollments will decline. Community colleges need to be equipped to recruit and serve more students of the type we call "nontraditional." These students present new and different problems--or challenges--to community colleges. Instructors and counselors who expect to deal with the typical students of ten years ago--eighteen years old, fresh out of high school, sure of themselves and their goals, and reasonably well off financially--are faced with apparently unmotivated students, older students who are torn between school and other obligations, and individuals who are unsure of themselves. Because many colleges simply don't know what to do with these students, the students drop out of school after a few weeks of consistent failure.

High attrition rates are costly. They cost schools money in state funds, and they cost society lost manpower and the money necessary to support those individuals who cannot support themselves. Clearly something must be done. Often, the community college can be the answer. In fact, it is frequently the last chance for many individuals to make something of their lives. According to Roueche, "Community colleges have become the primary vehicle for upward social and economic mobility for the lower two-thirds of the population."[1] For this to happen, though, community colleges and their staff members must recognize the nature of the situation and prepare to deal with it. This module is designed to help instructors motivate these students to learn--to stay in school and to become successful. It consists of Part A, which outlines the

situation, and Part B, which gives you some practical suggestions for improving retention of nontraditional students.

RATIONALE

Before we as instructors can become effective in teaching nontraditional students, we must become familiar with the characteristics of those students. We also must become aware that traditional teaching methods and instructor-pupil relationships often do not have significant effect on these students. Therefore, our task is to cultivate new attitudes and methods. This is not particularly difficult once we understand the nature of the typical nontraditional student and the methods that are most effective in helping him or her. This module provides techniques that we hope will make the instructor's task easier.

PART A: The Problem

KEY CONCEPTS

affective strategy
alternative teaching strategies
attrition
cognitive strategy
defensive behaviors
learning contracts
learning objectives
locus of control
nontraditional student
nonverbal behaviors
retention

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After successfully completing this module, you will be able to:

1. Write a one-sentence definition of the term nontraditional student in your own words.
2. Speculate on why traditional teaching methods generally fail with nontraditional students.
3. List five major difficulties in dealing with nontraditional students.
4. Demonstrate an awareness of the types of nontraditional students at your college.
5. List five classroom behaviors typical of the nontraditional student.
6. Define the term locus of control.
7. Develop specific methods that can be put into practice to improve student retention in the classroom.

PRETEST

You can check your answers with the Answer Key at the end of Part A.

1. Write a one-sentence definition of the term locus of control.

_____

2. Briefly discuss two reasons why traditional teaching methods tend to fail with nontraditional students.

   a. _____

   b. _____

3. List five difficulties involved in dealing with nontraditional students.

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

4. List five classroom behaviors typical of the nontraditional student.

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

THE TRADITIONAL TEACHER AND THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

The average age of the community college student today is 27. Obviously there has been a drastic change in student population in the last ten years. More and more so-called "nontraditional" students--those who are older than eighteen or nineteen, who have full-time jobs and family responsibilities, and who have been out of school for years--are returning to the classroom. Joining these older students in commu-

nity colleges and some universities are students who did not graduate from high school or who managed to graduate in spite of severe deficiences in verbal and written communication and in basic skills such as mathematics. In addition, many of these students believe they have little control over their own lives. They are external in locus of control and feel that powerful others dictate success for them. As a result, college instructors who expect to teach these students in the same way they teach traditional students guarantee low success levels and high drop-out rates. We who have doctorates in eighteenth-century English literature and colonial American history are bewildered and resentful when our students do not share our enthusiasm for Swift and Franklin. Since we are typically internally motivated and feel we have substantial control over life events, it is difficult for us to understand new students who believe they have little control. The solution is not to water down our course material, but to use our ingenuity and develop our flexibility so that we can more effectively choose the subject matter we include in our courses and more effectively present that material to our students. We are doing the individuals in our classes a disservice if we fail to provide the quality of subject matter they need or if we teach in such a way that they fail to become involved in learning. We are doing ourselves a disservice if we allow unnecessary frustration and resentment to sap our energy and to detract from our pride in our profession. Also, we are letting ourselves in for a difficult and frustrating struggle if we try to pretend that the "new" students will go away and will be replaced by the traditionally eager, energetic undergraduates who want desperately to succeed and who will do anything we ask to ensure that success.

Since we will be dealing with nontraditional students, we must become familiar with them. According to a review of research by Cross, there are several traits common to community college students.

1. Community college students have special abilities and aptitudes about which we know very little.
2. They have more practical attitudes toward college than do typical university undergraduates.
3. They tend to be unsure of themselves, which leads them to choose certain pathways to financial security rather than try something new.
4. They are less confident of their academic abilities, but more confident of nonacademic abilities.
5. Most new students in community colleges come from educationally and financially improverished home backgrounds.
6. They aspire to managerial and professional occupations.[2]

Unfortunately, the average community college faculty member is not equipped to deal with these students. The community college instructor, like the instructor in a four-year institution, is an academic specialist.

Roueche points out that such a teacher "derives his greatest satisfaction from transmitting the knowledge of his chosen discipline to able students. Consequently, he prefers to teach advanced and specialized courses. These courses afford him the opportunity to teach that which he knows best. Simply stated, some community college instructors want to teach students who are easy to teach--those who are already motivated. . . . [They] are concerned about 'status' and being properly identified with higher education. Teaching remedial or developmental courses does not identify the instructor with higher academia."[3] The result of this mismatch between the needs and characteristics of students and the attitudes of instructors is an attrition problem. According to instructors, students have the right to fail, and those who do are explained away as not being "college material." The tragedy is that most of these students can be community college material; they can become successful dental assistants or automobile mechanics or welders; they can develop higher self-concepts. They can accomplish all these things--if they are not expected to compete in traditional classroom settings. We cannot invite students into our "democratic" community colleges through the open door and then expect them to perform exactly like freshmen at large universities who have earned high-school diplomas and passed the entrance exams.

Fortunately, the problems perlexing teachers of nontraditional students--lack of student motivation and interest, irregular attendance, dropping out--have some simple solutions. This module is a guide to some practical survival methods that teachers can use by themselves or initiate with a colleague or two. None requires any administrative approval. We have made this a "cookbook" of easy-to-use teaching tricks

designed for those teachers who find themselves wondering what to do with these "new" students. And those teachers, according to our experience, include just about everybody.

To begin with, let us consider the types of nontraditional students. Since nontraditional students are, after all, individuals, we cannot lump them into one category and expect to deal with them effectively. Some consistent types and consistent problems emerge once we begin to familiarize ourselves with the human beings associated with the names on the computerized class roll. We have a hunch that you will recognize some or all of the types of students that are described in the following pages. The descriptions are drawn from students we have taught; although we have combined character traits, the descriptions represent fairly typical nontraditional students.

Betty is a displaced homemaker. She is recently divorced and has two teenage children and no vocational skills. She is in her early forties, which means that she can expect to support herself for at at least twenty years. She needs to work because child support payment is tenuous, and she is not receiving alimony. She has not been in an educational environment since she graduated from high school, and she is afraid because she thinks that everybody else knows more than she does. She has, in all likelihood, a built-in suspicion that she will fail.

Ernie is a 30-year-old black veteran who has been chronically unemployed and who has decided to go back to school on the GI bill. He is going to school full time. When he comes to your class his veteran's check has not come in; he is upset about the likelihood that it will be held up longer and is wondering what he is going to do for money until it arrives. Ernie does not have a high-school diploma,

but he has a great deal of "street wisdom." He feels cheated. He feels that he has lost time and that society owes him something. Ernie has no family obligations. He is single, with no personal ties; he feels that he does not have anyone rooting for him. He depends on his verteran's check for his livelihood. Ernie is in transition from one world to the significantly different community college environment, so he must change behaviors on a series of levels. Also, he is suspicious as to whether anything he learns at the community college, particularly in basic classes, will be applicable to his life situation.

Bob is a 48-year-old Caucasian who has decided, after twenty-five years of blue-collar work, that he wants to upgrade himself--and to him that means getting a new job. So he is coming back to the community college to begin a new career. He works at a company that gives additional compensation to employees who attend night school. He is taking six hours of course work in the evenings after working an eight-hour day, five days a week. Bob's children are grown; he is still married. Motivation is not Bob's problem, but applicability is. If your course is not relevant to him or if he cannot see it leading to a white-collar position, you are in danger of losing him. He feels that this is the last chance he has to make a change. This makes him very intense, very prone to question the value of your approach, and somewhat disassociated from others in the class.

Debbie is seventeen--and young, even for seventeen! She believes that she is a good student, but she has never really disciplined herself to study. She has seen many college movies and believes that she

will find a husband of professional aspiration who will care for her for the rest of her life. She is poorly motivated in many of her courses, because she can't see the relationship between husband finding and the course. She has poor skills in many respects, but she achieved Bs in high school and has a very unrealistic view of what her skills are. Because she has always been loved and sheltered at home and at school, she is not at all prepared for even minimal failure. If her first assignment does not produce that typical B grade, Debbie will exhibit drop-out behavior. Debbie is the type of student who might appear on your office doorstep crying if she receives a C on her first paper. Her pain will be genuine; she truly does not understand how she could have been a "good student" in high school and now be below average. Debbie could very easily become discouraged and drop out of class unless she gets a sympathetic teacher who can give her favorable feedback along with criticism.

EXERCISE

We have told you a great deal about these four hypothetical students. We have learned from experience that it might take half or two-thirds of the semester to identify such character traits by yourself. If, however, you were aware of some of the typical behaviors, you might be able to spot some during the first few classes. In this exercise, you will list observable classroom behaviors that you might associate with each of these students. You will also name students of yours who have exhibited behaviors similar to those you have listed for Betty, Ernie, Bob, and Debbie. You will indicate how you are responding to that student's behavior.

BETTY

Briefly review the preceding description of Betty and try to visualize her in your classroom. List some typical classroom behaviors you would associate with this type of student.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Compare year list with our following description.

TYPICAL CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS. Betty is withdrawn. She sits outside the immediate field of vision on the sides or at the back of the classroom. She does not readily make eye contact and, when called upon, speaks very quietly. She looks extremely conscientious and takes voluminous notes, and she exhibits signs of confusion when instructions are not immediately clear to her. At such times, she will turn to the person sitting next to her and ask for clarification rather than raising her hand and asking the instructor. She is careful to bring all her materials and appears organized. She has defensive body posture and seems territorial, as though she wants to secure a small place where she can feel safe.

Name of your student _____

Typical classroom behavior _____

_____

_____

_____

Action(s) taken _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

ERNIE

Briefly review the preceding description of Ernie and try to visualize him in your classroom. List some typical classroom behaviors you would associate with this type of student.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Compare your list with our following description.

TYPICAL CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS. Ernie takes a seat in the very back of the room. He slouches in his seat. He never has his books, pencil, pen, or paper with him. He arrives late and leaves as soon as possible. He never stays to ask a question, never takes notes. He looks out the window, if there is one, or studies the ceiling. Perhaps unconsciously, he is using a number of ways to tell you that he is not really interested in what is going on. He develops no relationships with other members of the class. He does not talk to them or ask questions.

Name of your student _____

Typical classroom behavior _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Action(s) taken _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

BOB

Briefly review the preceding description of Bob and try to visualize him in your classroom. List some typical classroom behaviors you would associate with this type of student.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Compare your list with our following description.

TYPICAL CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR. Bob arrives early and sits in the front row. He is thoroughly but rather antagonistically involved in all that happens. He questions you often with questions bordering on rudeness. He has a tendency to pick up on any little discrepancies in the instructions you give the first day of class. Bob's forty-hour work week and his

home obligations affect his energy level. As the semester progresses, you see him becoming less and less alert. He may fall asleep or not respond to questions. He begins to look worn and frayed, and you feel that his attention is slipping away. Students like Bob often stop attending class two-thirds of the way through the semester.

Name of your student _____

Typical classroom behavior _____

_____

_____

_____

Action(s) taken _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

DEBBIE

Briefly review the preceding description of Debbie and try to visualize her in your classroom. List some typical classroom behaviors you would associate with this type of student.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Compare your list with our following description.

TYPICAL CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR. Debbie's behavior matches that of the majority of the class. She enters with the group and leaves with the group and seems to have very little identity of her own. She gossips, chatters, giggles; her span of concentration is short. She may miss assignments or ask you to repeat something that has just been covered. She is often more interested in the behavior of others in the class than she is in the material presented. It is difficult to maintain her interest. She frequently chats with someone behind her while class is going on. She finds ways to call attention to herself because she is used to being the center of attention, but she's skillful enough at socially acceptable behavior that she never breaks the rules blatantly. Sometimes she asks a coy question or offers a cute response to a serious question. Debbie never stays after class to ask questions. In fact, unless she needs to discuss her grade, she will never make contact. Debbie thinks of all kinds of implausible excuses for missing class; her friend's car broke down or her sister's child was sick.

Name of your student _____

Typical classroom behavior _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Action(s) taken _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

These four hypothetical students are not extreme cases. In fact they are fairly typical, as you probably realized when you listed traits of your own students in these exercises. In Part A we have invited you to consider students in your classes who have similar questions and problems, fears and misgivings. In Part B we will suggest some strategies for initiating and building rapport with these students, for keeping them involved, for building their self-concepts, for encouraging them to make commitments, and for motivating them to stay in the learning environment.

POSTTEST

You can check your answers with the answer key at the end of Part A.

1. Write a one-sentence definition of the term locus of control.

   _____

   _____

2. Discuss briefly two reasons that traditional teaching methods tend to fail with nontraditional students.

   a. _____

   _____

   b. _____

   _____

3. List five difficulties involved in dealing with nontraditional students.

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

4. List five classroom behaviors typical of the nontraditional student.

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

ANSWER KEY

1. The term locus of control refers to an individual's perception of who controls the outcomes in his or her life--the individual (internal locus of control) or powerful others (external locus of control).
2. You may have mentioned that
   a. nontraditional students are reluctant to try new experiences and
   b. they have a more practical attitude toward college than traditional students do, and therefore are more demanding of relevance in their classes.
3. a. They may be deficient in basic skills.
   b. Most of them work full time and cannot devote full attention to their studies.
   c. They tend to have low self-concepts.
   d. Most come from working-class backgrounds and see no value in learning for its own sake.
   e. They are adults and must be treated as such.
4. a. They often hesitate to answer questions or to comment in class.
   b. They tend not to approach the instructor except to challenge a grade.
   c. They may sit at the back of the room.
   d. They often exhibit inattentive behaviors, such as looking at the ceiling or out the window.
   e. They neither come to class early nor stay late.

PART B:

THE SOLUTION

BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Now that we have considered the types of nontraditional students, the next step is discussing what to do about them. The solutions we suggest are easy and require neither expense nor administrative decisions. They can be quickly implemented, often just on your own initiative or with the help of one or two others. To begin with, we will consider strategies that deal with the student personally.

1. LEARN STUDENT NAMES. This seems like a simple suggestion, but it has profound results. All of us respond to being approached individually and personally, and the logical way of beginning that process is calling us by our names. The immediate problem is how to learn the names of 100 or more students each quarter or semester. One way of approaching the problem is telling students on the first day of class that they may sit anywhere they choose but that you would like them to sit in the same place for a week or two; tell them that that way you can make a seating chart and learn their names more quickly. For a few days, initially, students can wear name tags, perhaps with just the first names highly visible so that you can see the name and reinforce name and face associations. You can have students introduce themselves and focus on their names--how did they get their names, do they have nicknames, what do they prefer to be called, or why do or don't they like their names. Perhaps you can ask your students to give a brief portrait of themselves in which they concentrate on their names.

2. PROVIDE NONVERBAL ENCOURAGEMENT. Provide a secure, reassuring, positive atmosphere. There are several ways of encouraging such an environment that don't involve the spoken word. Maintain eye contact with students. Move around the room and, if you are comfortable doing so, touch students from time to time. It is important that you be animated and expressive in your presentation. Control nervous mannerisms. Fiddling with a tie or with a lock of hair indicates to students that you are not self-confident. This can be particularly unnerving to nontraditional students. These students react positively to teachers who seem to be firmly in control of the situation.

3. AVOID JUDGING STUDENTS. Without realizing it, teachers can exhibit judging behaviors that discourage nontraditional students by making them feel even more inadequate than they already feel. A behavior to avoid is judging students on the basis of appearance or dress. We must not allow ourselves to be turned off by a student who is unkempt or who is wearing nontraditional clothing such as motorcycle apparel or disco-type apparel. Another behavior to avoid is sexual stereotyping: we may unconsciously assume that females have a certain set of interests and males have another. Age stereotyping is another judgment trap. We may expect certain behaviors from people in certain age groups; for example, we may assume that older students are automatically more self-assured or serious about their work than are eighteen-year-olds. As much as we may believe that we are not prejediced, racial or ethnic considerations can cause us to react subconsciously in ways that students find disturbing. For example, do you expect different attendance patterns from certain groups of students? Do you find yourself avoiding certain subjects in the classroom because of the fear of offending somebody? Do you tend to

target your examples towards certain groups in your class? Do you assume students have certain expertise based on racial or ethnic characteristics? Becoming aware of this type of judging behavior can help us avoid it.

4. LEARN SOMETHING PERSONAL ABOUT EACH STUDENT. This sounds simple, but it requires some effort and energy on the part of the teacher. This strategy is an extension of the suggestion to learn your students' names; it is one step further in the process of personalizing relationships. Learning how many children a student has, what his personal interests and hobbies are, or what kinds of books she likes to read can help you establish fairly quickly a warm relationship with that student. Teachers of composition courses might have an advantage here because students often reveal personal areas of their lives in writing; but whatever your discipline, you need to find ways of bringing out students' personal interests. Perhaps asking students for a brief self-assessment at the beginning of the semester would be helpful. Asking them simple questions such as "Where did you go to high school?" "Are you married?" "Do you have children?" "What kinds of things do you like to do in your spare time?" can get them started.

5. RELATE TO STUDENTS ON A PERSONAL LEVEL. This is the complementary side of learning something personal about each student. It is important for you to be willing to share parts of yourself and of your personal life with your students if you expect them to share with you. There are a number of easy ways of accomplishing this. In classroom presentation you can speak occasionally from personal experience. If you ask students to write a paragraph describing a personality trait of someone they are close to, you can write as an example a paragraph describing one of your children or your husband or your father. There is a great deal to be said

for sharing the immediacy of a personal experience, whether your car just broke down or you just had a hassle with the baby sitter. You can express those feelings spontaneously in an informal way and find your students responding to you not only as an authority figure but as a person. However, use discretion with this technique; no one wants to spend a semester listening to an instructor tell nothing but war stories. If you ask your students for a brief self-assessment, you might give them a similar assessment of your self. Let them ask you questions about yourself on the first day of class. Explain that since you expect them to share some personal characteristics with you, you are willing to share some with them. Let them interview you.

6. PROVIDE SPECIFIC POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT. Taking the time to compliment a student on some specific thing that he or she has done well can have tremendous payoffs for a teacher. The key here is specificity. A student will sense a lack of genuineness if you compliment profusely and generally, but if you can pick out one particular element of her work or one particular aspect of his attitude that you like, your comment will have much more meaning. A student who has written a paper that is not particularly effective but who has used a striking metaphor, for example, can be complimented on that use. You may compliment a student on the perceptiveness of her question; if you indicate that you remember her asking several other perceptive questions, your compliment will be more impressive. One word of caution here is that you need to be alert and sensitive as to how your students are receiving the words. Some students feel uncomfortable about receiving any compliments at all. Such students will become more uncomfortable if they continue to receive compliments. An understanding of basic body language and facial expressions is helpful

in this instance.

7. TREAT YOUR STUDENTS AS ADULTS. Sometimes teachers unwittingly put down their students by treating them as children, by overlooking them, or by exhibiting impersonal kinds of behavior. One example that you've probably seen is a teacher turning away from a student to address a colleague who is walking by. If you do not excuse yourself to the student or introduce him to the colleague, you are treating him as less than a responsible adult. Perhaps the most effective approach is introducing your student to the colleague and then asking the student if he minds if you talk with the colleague; you may be able to include the student, at least for a short time.

Another way of making your students feel important is spending time with them. This could be in the coffee shop or in your office. Before and after class you can chat informally with groups. When you meet a student in the hall or on the campus, smiling and giving a personal greeting is very effective. Call the student by name; it makes a great deal of difference. When something particularly important happens to a student--a new baby, a new car--that you find out about, your mentioning it in or out of class can make the student believe that you care about her as a person. It is easy to point out accomplishments of students who are actively involved in sports or professional groups, who have received awards, or who have been given notice in the newspaper, but there are ways of giving credit to quieter students who do not have such successes. For example, when you are discussing an assignment that you have graded, you might point out that one student in the class had a thorough and effective answer to Number 6 and then read it aloud. If the student is shy, you may not want to call him or her by name; your mentioning the

answer in class will convince the student that you noticed something good about the paper.

8. MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE. Any teacher who is responsible for teaching five sections of English Composition or for teaching three lab courses will recognize that this is often a difficult thing to do. However, it is essential, partically with students who are likely to drop out of school. You are serving as a role model to these students, and keeping reliable office hours gives them a sense of your commitment. If you set office hours, be sure to keep them. Be on time. Spend as much time in the office as you have promised; if for any reason you won't be able to be in your office on a given day, give your students advance notice. You have, in essence, made a contract with them and you should keep it.

Be in class for all of your allotted time. Perpetual tardiness can give students the idea that promptness is not something that you care about.

You may be reluctant to give out your home phone number for fear that students will pester you, but it is important to establish rapport with your students, so perhaps you can find a mutually agreeable approach. The best approach might be to allow your students to call you at home when it is really important. Generally this kind of privilege is not abused, and it does establish a high trust factor. However, if you run into difficulty because of such an arrangement, you might instead set up specific hours during the evening when you will be available. You might allow students to call you on weekends, or you might want to make it clear that students may call you at home only in case of an emergency. Be diplomatic about whatever rules you set up and approach the question of calling

you at home on an adult-to-adult basis.

9. NEVER HUMILIATE A STUDENT. Although you don't intend to humiliate students, you may inadvertently interact with a student in a way that embarrasses him or calls attention to her and makes her uncomfortable. Even if such embarrassment is subtle, it can discourage a student and make it difficult for him to come back to your class. Avoid sarcasm with nontraditional students, as well as teasing that is destructive in nature. Determining what might be dangerous is sometimes difficult and requires a good bit of perception on the part of the teacher. A young woman, for instance, who has been sheltered may be embarrassed very easily even by a compliment. A general rule of thumb is to respond to students in the same way that they deal with you. If the student teases you, you can feel reasonable assured about responding in the same way.

One rule that's easy to remember is never to exhibit a student's work without his or her permission. Using a student's paper as an example of the wrong way to do something is humiliating, but some students will be embarrassed by having good work exhibited. Again, you must use good judgment.

10. DISCOVER PERSONAL SITUATIONS THAT COULD INTERFERE WITH STUDENT LEARNING. This can be a formal or informal assessment process; but it is important with nontraditional students to discover problems that might arise in their scheduling. Such things as irregular work schedules, babysitter problems, and bus routing problems can wreak havoc with a student's class attendance; it is to your advantage to learn about these problems ahead of time so that you can try to help the student overcome them. Be aware that your community college students may have safety concerns about coming to campus after dark. If this is the case with

your evening students, you might arrange for a security guard in the parking lot or post a car pool list in the classroom.

11. BE AS POSITIVE AS POSSIBLE. This is not easy when you are having a hard day, but there are some techniques that will make you and your students feel positive. Voice quality, for instance, is extremely important. Be energetic and bright in your inflection. A monotone or a deep, tired voice will give away your lack of interest. Be willing to laugh in class, and encourage your students to laugh as well. If at all possible, be available before class for small talk, chatting, greeting students. Sometimes this will be therapeutic for you; if your energy level is running low, a few exchanges with students will energize you.

12. READ INATTENTIVE BEHAVIORS. We all have observed inattentive behavior in teaching situations. Some behaviors to look for are shuffling or shifting in chairs, persistent coughing by one or more students, glances at other students or watches, stacking books when there are five minutes left in the class period. These behaviors indicate that you have lost student attention. Also notice posture, attitude, lack of eye contact.

When you notice such behaviors, your response should be immediate and decisive. Silence is often effective in regaining student attention. Calling the student by name to engage him or her in conversation should dispel the student's inattention. Moving about the classroom can alleviate inattention. If a student senses your presence close by, he or she may become more alert. Changing the pace of the class can be most effective. For example, switching from a lecture to a small-group activity can wake up the class. Breaking the rhythm of your usual behavior can break the monotony. Another suggestion is allowing breaks,

particularly in classes over an hour and fifteen minutes long.

13. COMMIT YOURSELF TO AT LEAST ONE INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCE WITH EACH STUDENT. These conferences need not be long when the students do not have significant problems. They may simply be friendly, personal conversations. Yet this kind of conference is the only means of convincing them of your interest. Sometimes you yourself can solve some of the student's problems, or you can guide the student to someone who can help him or her. A surprising number of students are not familiar with the counseling services available at their community college.

Teacher evaluations show that this individual conference is often the element that students appreciate most.

14. TELEPHONE STUDENTS WHEN HIGH-RISK PATTERNS DEVELOP. Examples of high-risk patterns are several missed assignments, chronic absences, and perpetual tardiness. Telephoning students can be an effective way of reaching them; students are often impressed that an instructor would take the time to call them.

One word of caution is in order here. Discuss the problem only with the student. Confidentiality is always important. Respect the student as an adult and keep information concerning his or her performance confidential!

15. DEVOTE THE FIRST WEEK OF CLASSES TO CREATING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT. Research indicates that students who feel comfortable in the classroom setting and who have some positive rapport with the teacher are much more likely to speed up learning processes as the semester goes on. Students often surpass normal course expectations if they feel very positive about the learning climate. In the long run you will accomplish more learning by devoting the first few classes to creating a supportive environment.

AFFECTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Make a contract with yourself using the following form:

LEARNING CONTRACT

I agree to use these specific behaviors:

for the week of

2. Form a support group with three to five of your colleagues that would
   a. meet on a regular basis to exchange ideas and concerns.
   b. visit one anothers' classes to observe specific behaviors that positively or negatively influence the attitudes of students.
   c. practice new classroom behaviors in a controlled environment (role play).
   d. assist one another in working with students who present special problems.
3. Watch yourself on videotape. Find the most comfortable way of "performing."
   a. Tape yourself in a studio with only a technician present.
   b. Have a colleague tape you in a studio and give you feedback.
   c. Have a colleague tape a class session. Be sure to tape a session that is typical of your general style.

4. Write down your plan for an activity you can use on the first day of class that would help you learn something personal about each student.

ESTABLISHING INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDELINES

Once you have established a rapport with students and created a positive learning environment, you can employ some subject-related techniques that have proven effective with nontraditional students. Following are descriptions of some of the more widely used subject-related techniques.

1. PROVIDE STRUCTURE. Some research studies have demonstrated that students who have problems maintaining momentum in college settings need a structured environment with clear-cut incremental assignments, frequent feedback, and periodic evaluation.

2. HAVE AN ATTENDANCE POLICY. It is obvious that establishing a clearcut attendance policy is the first step in providing the kind of structure discussed in Item 1. If there is no policy, the student does not have a clear indication of how many classes he or she can miss; as a result the student will be less likely to establish a routine of attendance. One teacher we know tells his students on the first day of class that he does not miss a class without making up the time, and that he expects them to do the same.

3. PROVIDE ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF LEARNING. The key here is the word alternative. No one method of learning will be appropriate for all students. Remember not to always lecture, always discuss, or always provide individualized packets. If you can provide variety in the classroom, you will have more of an opportunity of reaching a larger segment of the students. You may want to include role playing or small-group activities in your class. One history teacher gives credit for field trips to places that are relevant to the subject she is dealing with in her history class. Taking students to museums, zoos, or botanical gardens, or exposing them through apprentice programs to professionals in areas relevant to their

majors can be valuable.

4. MAKE MATERIAL IMMEDIATELY RELEVANT. It is important that students feel that what they are learning is pertinent to their daily lives. If a student in an English class can see how verbal skills will help him in a job interview, in asking his boss for a raise, or in writing a memo relatively free of grammatical mistakes, then he will be more likely to be motivated. A chemistry teacher might do a unit on household chemicals or on ecology and how different chemicals affect human health; she could bring in newspaper stories about chemical wastes, contamination, and food additives.

5. MAKE MATERIALS SEQUENTIAL. The sequence may range from the easiest to the most difficult material or it may be arranged chronologically; the key is having an apparent, logical order. If a student who is intimidated by the learning process can take small logical steps as he or she learns, the student will feel much more comfortable. Being able to see how the steps fit into a whole pattern will also add to his or her sense of accomplishment and learning.

6. PROVIDE LOTS OF IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK. This can be done in a variety of ways. The feedback may be verbal or written; it may be as simple as a touch or as involved as gathering a group together to discuss the implications of what has been said. One way of providing immediate feedback is returning student papers, if possible, during the next class period; it is frustrating to a student to not be able to see how he or she has done on an assignment. It may be irritating to teachers to be asked every class period about a set of papers, but it indicates the concern students have about how well they are doing in class. Another suggestion for providing feedback is placing the grade on the last page of the

student's paper, along with any written comments you may have about the paper as a whole. Grades should not be announced or returned in some kind of hierarchical order, because this will embarrass students. If a great deal of your feedback must be written because of the size of your class, it is important that the written feedback be clear, frequent, and specific. A phrase such as "Needs development" beside an answer to a sociology essay response tells the student nothing. The most effective feedback can be as simple as saying "That's a good answer" or giving an example that is similar to one that a student has just provided.

7. PROVIDE TUTORING FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY WITH SUBJECT MATTER. Although it takes a substantial amount of time on the part of the teacher, it is worthwhile to set up tutoring sessions with students who are genuinely struggling with content. A good beginning is arranging to see such students once during the semester. Some tutoring programs have been organized and staffed independently of departments in the college, using instead professional tutors. Another recently popular variation is peer tutoring. You may want to select students who are mastering the subject with comparative ease and who get along well with the other students. You might even make peer tutoring an alternate learning activity for these students. As you have probably discovered, one of the best ways of learning or of reinforcing what you know is teaching someone else; often peer tutors themselves gain the most from helping students with serious problems in the course. You should avoid assigning peer tutors who do the work <u>for</u> the students rather than teaching the students how to do the work for themselves. Of course, the tutoring process must be carefully monitored by you to avoid misinformation at any point.

8. ALLOW STUDENTS TO PACE THEIR OWN LEARNING AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. This has become a popular concept in the last several years. There are many ways of enabling a student to work at his or her own pace. The learning contract is one method often used: you sit down with the student and structure a careful plan of small, sequential learning units, with minimum standards for completion. This allows for a great deal of flexibility in the learning process, because the kinds of contracts negotiated with students may be very different. In the process of working out such arrangements, you find ways of making students comfortable with mastering the material required in the course. This kind of structure is particularly beneficial for adult learners, who often have unusual schedule demands that preclude their always being in class. Using a learning contract or a self-paced learning strategy enables you to arrange a special work timetable late in the term, which could conclude after the term is over if extenuating circumstances justify such action.

9. DON'T GIVE TESTS ON MONDAY. All of us at some time have felt the annoying pressure of dreading a test on Monday while we tried to enjoy the weekend. Your students will feel the same kind of pressure. It's wise to avoid failure when possible; tests on Mondays increase that likelihood.

10. START AND STOP CLASS ON TIME. This not only helps provide the structure that nontraditional students want and need, but also helps to set a good example for students who tend to be lax about time schedules. If you make it obvious that punctuality is important to you, they will be more likely to make it a high priority of their own. You may be asking students to change personal patterns of many years, so you may need to work out compromises with such a policy. For instance, if a student comes in late, you could permit the student to stay but require that he or she

make up the time in some other way. It would be beneficial for you to arrive at class early and stay late, simply to chat with students, to answer questions, and to establish a rapport from which to begin the actual subject matter presentation.

11. MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH THE STUDENTS' OTHER TEACHERS AND SHARE CONCERNS AND SUCCESS. It does very little good to gossip about a student or to talk about his or her shortcomings; however, another teacher might be able to give you some valuable insights into a student's character, interests, personal problems, talents, or skill deficiencies. This process may be an informal one; if the student presents a serious problem, you may want to formally contact his or her other instructors. A good place to start is with the student's class schedule to find out who the other instructors are. Or, if you are beginning a new term, you could look at the student's class schedule for the last semester to see if past instructors can help you discover critical problem areas before you begin working with the student. It is possible that your problem with the student is similar to problems other teachers have had. It is also possible that you are having a problem with a student that no one else has had. You can deal more effectively with either of these cases if you know the facts.

12. ALLOW AN ADEQUATE PAUSE AFTER A QUESTION. Recent research has shown that most teachers allow a one- to two-second pause between asking a question and calling for a response. A three- to five-second wait is much more likely to result in good-quality answers in classroom discussion. Although this sounds simple, you will need to practice in order to allow an adequate pause; you must develop a good sense of how long a three-second wait is. It is important to allow this amount of time

after each question and not summarize, restate, or ask a new question before students have had time to reflect on the first question. This is an especially useful technique to use with nontraditional students who have often been told that they are slow in responding. They need the extra time.

13. LET STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN THE LEARNING PROCESS BY HELPING MAKE CONTENT DECISIONS. There are several ways that this can be done in a course. Ask students if there are any areas of study that they are specifically interested in that apply to the course you are teaching. For example, if you teach an engineering class in a semi-arid part of the country, you may find that your students are interested in setting up and maintaining irrigation equipment; you may want to sperd more time on this than you would ordinarily. Another way of involving students is giving them the opportunity to demonstrate talents that relate to the subjects you are teaching. A student who has an artistic bent might be willing to do posters for an ecology unit. A student who is proficient in debate, perhaps having debated in high school, could structure a debate for a communications course. This would be a project that would develop verbal skills, would integrate well into the classroom goals, and would allow her to show skills she has developed. You can also ask students to suggest ways in which the class might be made more interesting or relevant to them.

14. PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC WRITTEN LEARNING OBJECTIVES SO THAT THEY KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE COURSE AND WHAT YOU EXPECT FROM THEM. There are several types of objectives that you might want to consider as you prepare course guidelines. Obviously some objectives will

deal with content, but don't forget that you can also state objectives regarding the attitudes of students or that set minimum standards of performance (such as words per minute in typing or shorthand class). In other words, cover the three domains of Bloom's Taxonomy: the cognitive or informational level, the affective or attitudinal domain, and the psychomotor or skill domain when they are relevant to your class.

15. ASSESS STUDENTS' SKILLS AND ATTITUDES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SEMESTER SO THAT YOU CAN USE THE INFORMATION TO PLAN MORE RELEVANT LEARNING ACTIVITIES. Some of the areas that you might want to consider are skill levels, self-concept, attitudes toward learning and the community college situation, work-related problems, study skills, and personal problems that might interfere with the learning process.

16. ASK STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN AN EVALUATION OF THE COURSE. Evaluations are probably most helpful when they occur intermittently throughout the semester or quarter, since course materials can then be altered to respond to student evaluations. Various aspects of the learning situation such as course content, instructional methods, reactions to learning experiences, student self-evaluation, and student opinion of the instructor may be included. If you make it obvious that you really value student opinions and use them to revise your course, you are providing a strong dose of involvement. To make the evaluation even more helpful to you, you may want to ask each student to describe what he or she considers is lacking in the course or what he or she would like to see added. You might be surprised at some suggestions you get from students; some of them can be innovative and yet very simple to implement.

COGNITIVE LEARNING ACTIVITES

1. Choose one of your course objectives and create a class activity that you've never tried before.
2. Practice feedback.
   a. Role play with your support group, giving feedback to a student who is doing well and to one who is doing poorly.
   b. Think of three effective new ways of providing feedback.
3. Visit a bookstore and find at least one recent best seller that relates to your field and that you can use as a resource in your class. (An example might be Carl Sagan's The Dragons of Eden.)
4. If your subject permits, prepare a class activity around one or more popular television programs. Watch a program with a medical setting, a law enforcement setting, or a business setting--whatever is appropriate to your area--and discuss the accuracy of the professional images presented.

FINAL ACTIVITY

Look back at our initial descriptions of Betty's, Ernie's, Bob's, and Debbie's classroom behavior (pages 7-8). Write down one cognitive and one affective strategy to use with each of these students.

BETTY

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

ERNIE

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

BOB

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

DEBBIE

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: _____

_____

_____

FINAL ACTIVITY ANSWER KEY

You could have chosen a number of different responses. Here are samples:

BETTY

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: Get to class early and chat informally with her. (Betty would probably be in class early.)

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: Tailor an early assignment to draw from Betty's experience in a positive way.

ERNIE

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: Because he may not return after the first class, learn his name and make an appointment with him during that class.

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: In your meeting, design with Ernie a learning activity that will have practical value for him.

BOB

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: Since initially Bob seems to be seeking attention, let him earn part of his grade by making an oral report.

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: Early in the semester, plan a schedule with Bob that takes into account his work schedule.

DEBBIE

AFFECTIVE STRATEGY: Call on Debbie frequently in class. This will let her know that she needs to be alert and prepared.

COGNITIVE STRATEGY: Because she needs structure and careful monitoring, program various kinds of supervised activities (checksheets, peer tutors, work in groups). Debbie is not the kind of student who does well with self-paced packets.

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